

The meaning of the words of the Prophet, “The Qur’ān was revealed in seven *aḥruf* (dialects/modes).”

In the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim, Ubayy ibn Ka‘b reported that the Prophet, peace be upon him, was with the Banū Ghifār when Jibrīl came to him and said, “Allah commands you to recite the Qur’ān to your Community in one mode.” He said, “I ask Allah for His pardon and forgiveness. My Community will not be able to do that.” Then he came a second time and said, “Allah commands you to recite the Qur’ān to your Community in two modes.” He said, “I ask Allah for His pardon and forgiveness. My Community will not be able to do that.” He came a third time and said, “Allah commands you to recite the Qur’ān to your Community in three modes.” He replied, “I ask Allah for His pardon and forgiveness. My Community will not be able to do that.” He came a fourth time and said, “Allah commands you to recite the Qur’ān to your Community in seven modes. Whichever mode they recite, it is correct.” At-Tirmidhī reported that Ubayy said, “The Messenger of

Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, met Jibrīl and said, ‘Jibrīl, I was sent to an illiterate community. Some of them are old women and old men, boys and girls, and men who do not read at all.’ He said to him, ‘Muḥammad, the Qur’ān was revealed in seven modes.’” (*ṣaḥīḥ*) This story is confirmed in the main authorities: al-Bukhārī, Muslim, the *Muwatṭā’*, Abū Dāwūd, an-Nasā’ī and other books in the form of the story about Hishām ibn Ḥakīm with ‘Umar which we will mention later.

Scholars disagree about what is meant by the seven modes, and there are thirty-five things mentioned by al-Bustī. We will mention five of them here:

- This is the position of most of the people of knowledge, such as Sufyān ibn ‘Uyayna, ‘Abdullāh ibn Wahb, aṭ-Ṭabarī, aṭ-Ṭaḥāwī and others. What is meant are the seven manners of synonyms with different expressions, like *aqbala*, *ta‘āla* and *halluma* (all of which mean “come here”). Aṭ-Ṭaḥāwī said, “The clearest elucidation of that is what is mentioned in the *ḥadīth* of Abū Bakra, ‘Jibrīl came to the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and said, “Recite in one mode.” Mikā’il said, “Increase it.” He said, “Recite it in two modes.” Mikā’il said, “Increase it,” until it was seven modes. He said, “Recite it. Each is adequate unless you confuse an *āyat* of mercy for an *āyat* of punishment or an *āyat* of punishment with an *āyat* of mercy.” That is like *halluma*, *ta‘āla*, *aqbala*, *adhaba*, *asra‘a* and *‘ajjala*.” It is related from Ibn ‘Abbās that Ubayy ibn Ka‘b used to recite “wait for us” (57:13) “*undhurūnā*” as “*umhulūnā*”, “*akhkhirūnā*”, and “*arqubūnā*”. With the same *isnād*, it is reported that Ubayy recited in 2:20 “*marrū*” instead of “*mashaw*” and “*sa‘aw*” (they walk). In al-Bukhārī, az-Zuhrī said, “These modes are about the same matter. They do not differ in respect of the *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*.”

Aṭ-Ṭaḥāwī said, “There was scope for people in the letters since they were unable to take the Qur’ān in other than their dialects because they were illiterate and only a few of them could write. It was hard for someone with a dialect to change

to another. If he wanted to do that, it would have entailed great hardship and so they were given scope regarding different expressions as long as the meaning was the same. They remained like that until many of them could write and the dialects reverted to that of the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. Then they were able to memorise those words and they no longer had the allowance to recite differently.” Ibn ‘Abdu’l-Barr said, “It is clear that scope for the seven modes was at a particular time out of necessity. When that necessity was removed, the ruling of the seven was removed, and the Qur’ān was recited in one mode.”

- Some people say that the seven dialects in the Qur’ān are the seven dialects of all the Arabs, both Yamanī and Nizār, because the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, was not ignorant of any of them. He was “given all the words”. It does not mean that the one mode has seven aspects, but these seven dialects are in different parts of the Qur’ān. Some of it is in the dialect of Quraysh, some in that of Hudhayl, some in Hawāzin, and some in Yamanī. Al-Khaṭṭābī said, “That is how the Qur’ān is recited in seven ways.” This is the meaning of the Qur’ān being revealed in seven modes. Al-Qāsim ibn Sallām believed that and Ibn ‘Atiyya preferred it. Some tribes used writing more than others. Anas mentioned that when ‘Uthmān told them to copy out the Qur’ān, he said, “When you and Zayd differ, then write in the dialect of Quraysh. It was revealed in their dialect.” (al-Bukhārī)

Qādī Ibn aṭ-Ṭayyib [al-Bāqillānī] said, “The meaning of ‘Uthmān’s words that it was revealed in the dialect of Quraysh, means most of it. It is not a definitive proof that it is all in the dialect of Quraysh since there are words and letters which differ from the dialect of Quraysh. This indicates that it was revealed in all the language of the Arabs, and no one can say that it was just Quraysh or one part of the Arabs rather than others.” Ibn ‘Abdu’l-Barr said that this meant that most of it was revealed in the dialect of Quraysh because other than

the dialect of Quraysh exists in sound readings with the use of the *hamzas* and the like. Quraysh did not use the *hamza*. Ibn ‘Aṭiyya said that the meaning of the “seven modes” is that the expressions of the seven tribes are in it.

- These seven dialects are all from the tribes of Muḍar. Some people said that. They used as evidence what ‘Uthmān said, “The Qur’ān was revealed in the language of Muḍar.” They said, “It is possible that part of it is that of Quraysh, part Kināna, part Asad, part Hudhayl, part Taym, part Ḍaba, and part Qays. They said these tribes of Muḍar contain the seven dialects in these ranks. Ibn Mas‘ūd used to like those who copied out the Qur’āns to be from Muḍar. Others objected to the idea that it was all from Muḍar and said that there are rare usages in Muḍar with which it is not permitted to write the Qur’ān.
- What is related from some scholars is exemplified by Qāḍī Ibn at-Ṭayyib who said, “I have reflected on the aspects of the differences in recitation and have found them to be seven. Some involve changes of vowelizing while the meaning and form remain, like *aṭharu* and *aṭhara* in 11:78; some do not change their form but change their meaning through inflection, as in 34:19, reading *bā‘id* or *bā‘ida*; some retain their form and change their meaning with different letters; some change the form while the meaning remains as in 101:5 where both *‘ahn* and *ṣūf* mean wool; some change their form and meaning; some entail a change of order; and some consist of addition or reduction.”
- What is meant by the seven modes are meanings in the Book of Allah: command and prohibition, promise and threat, stories, arguments and parables. Ibn ‘Aṭiyya says that this is weak because that is not called *aḥruf*. Furthermore there is consensus that it does not occur in making the lawful lawful or changing any of the meanings. Qāḍī Ibn at-Ṭayyib mentioned a *ḥadīth* along these lines from the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and then said, “This is not part of

what it is allowed for them to recite.” *Ḥarf* in this means ‘manner’ as Allah says, ‘one who worships Allah on an edge.’ (22:11). That is the meaning of the *ḥadīth* about the seven means of allowing and forbidding and the like.

It is also said that what is meant by the seven *aḥruf* are the seven readings that we have because all of that is sound as the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, stated. This, however, is not correct, as we will now explain.

Section on the seven readings

Most scholars, like ad-Dāwūdī, Ibn Abi Ṣufra and others said that these seven readings which are ascribed to the seven readers are not the seven *aḥruf* for which the Companions had allowance to recite. They refer merely to one *ḥarf* of those seven, which is what ‘Uthmān collected in the copy of the Qur’ān which he authorised. Ibn an-Naḥḥās and others mentioned that. These seven famous readings (*qirā’āt*) are the selections of those Imāms of recitation. That is because each of them chose what he related and the aspect he knew of the recitations which he considered to be the best and most appropriate. Each held to a path, related and recited it, and became famous for it. He is known for it and it is ascribed to him, like the mode of Nāfi‘ and the mode of Ibn Kathīr. One of them did not forbid choosing another nor object to it. He allowed it. Each of those seven has two or more choices related from him. All are sound.

Muslims at this time have agreed to rely on what is soundly transmitted from these imāms regarding those readings which they related and recorded in books. The consensus remains that they are correct, and the preservation of the Book which Allah promised has been secured. This is the position of the earlier imāms and excellent reliable men like Qāḍī Abū Bakr ibn aṭ-Ṭayyib, aṭ-Ṭabarī and others. Ibn ‘Aṭīyya said, “These seven readings have lasted through different times and places and the prayer is performed using them as their soundness is established by consensus. As for

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the rare (*shādhah*) readings, the prayer is not performed using them because there is no consensus on that. As for what is related from the Companions and the Followers about that, it can only be believed that they transmitted that. As for what is related from Abū's-Sammāl and those connected to him, one does not rely on it.”

Someone else said, “As for the rare (*shādhah*) readings of the copies of the transmitted Qur’ān, they are not considered to be the Qur’ān, and are not acted on as if they were part of it. It is most probable that they are clarification of the interpretation of the position of the one to whom they are ascribed, like the reading of Ibn Mas‘ūd. If the transmitter is explicit about having heard it from the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, then scholars have two positions about acting on it: negative or positive . The negative position is based on the fact that the transmitter did not relate it as a *ḥadīth*, but as Qur’ān, and it is not affirmed as such and so is not confirmed. The positive position is that even if it is not affirmed as Qur’ān, it is affirmed as *sunna*, and that obliges action, just as the case with all single *aḥādīth*.

Section: The *ḥadīth* of ‘Umar and Hishām

Ibn ‘Aṭiyya said, “Allah allowed these seven modes to His Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and Jibrīl brought them to him in a way which ensured inimitability and precise cohesion. His words, ‘*Recite what is easy of it,*’ did not permit any of the Companions to change any expression in one of these dialects as he wished. If that had been the case, then the Qur’ān would not have been inimitable, as people would have changed this and that and then it would have become other than what was revealed from Allah. The permission was for the seven modes of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, in order to give ample scope to his Community. Once he recited to Ubayy what Jibrīl brought him, and once to Ibn Mas‘ūd what had been presented to him.

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This was the crux of the difference between 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb's reading of *Sūrat al-Furqān* and that of Hishām ibn Ḥakīm. Otherwise how was it proper for the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, to say about the recitation of each of them which differed, 'That was how Jibrīl recited it to me.' Was it only that he recited it once like that and once like this? This is the meaning of what Anas said when he recited '*aṣwab*' instead of '*aqwam*' in *Sūrat al-Muzzammil* (73:6) meaning "more conducive". He was told, 'We recite it "*aqwam*".' He replied, "'*Aṣwab*", "*aqwam*" and "*ahya*" are all the same." This is the sense of what is reported from the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. If anyone had been permitted to do that, that would have invalidated the words of Allah, '*It is We who have sent down the Reminder and We will preserve it.*' (15:9)."

Al-Bukhārī, Muslim and others related that 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb said, "I heard Hishām ibn Ḥakīm reciting *Sūrat al-Furqān* in a different way from how I read it, and the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, himself had recited it to me. I almost grabbed him, but I waited until he had finished. Then I got him by his cloak and took him to the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. I said, 'Messenger of Allah, I heard this one reciting *Sūrat al-Furqān* differently to how you recited it to me!' The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, 'Let him recite.' He recited it as I had heard him recite it. The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, 'That is how it was revealed.' Then he told me, 'Recite.' I recited it and he said, 'That is how it was revealed. This Qur'ān was revealed in seven modes, so recite whatever you find easy of it.'"

Similar to this *ḥadīth* is what Muslim transmitted from Ubayy ibn Ka'b. He said, "I was in the mosque when a man came in to pray. He recited a reading to which I objected. Then another man entered and recited a different recitation to that of his companion. When they finished the prayer, we all went to the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and I said, 'This one recited a reading to which I objected and the other entered and

used a different recitation to that of his companion.’ The Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, commanded them to recite, and the Prophet commended what they had done. Then doubt entered my heart such as had not even affected me in the *Jāhiliyya*. When the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, saw what had overpowered me, he struck my chest and I started to sweat, feeling alarm as if I had been looking at Allah. He said to me, ‘Ubayy, I was sent a message to recite the Qur’ān in one mode and I replied that I wanted it to be made easy for my community. A second message commanded me to recite it in two modes, and I replied that I wanted it to be made easy for my community. Then I was told the third time, “Recite it in seven modes. You can ask for something for each time you returned to ask.” I said, “O Allah, forgive my Community! O Allah, forgive my Community!” I delayed the third until a Day when all creation even Ibrāhīm, peace be upon him, will ask of me.’”

Ubayy meant that he felt confusion and astonishment, in other words he had an impulse from Shayṭān which sullied his state and muddled his mind at that moment. The difference of the readings seemed terrible to him while it was not in itself terrible. Otherwise what would entail denial of the difference in the recitations, when that is not necessary? Praise be to Allah who abrogated what is greater than a reading! When the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, saw the thought that occurred to him, he woke him up by striking his chest. The result of that was the expansion of his breast and inward illumination so that the unveiling and expansion took him to a state of vision. When the ugliness of that thought was clear to him, he feared Allah and sweated profusely out of shame before Allah. This thought is the type of thing about which the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, spoke when they said to him, “We find things in ourselves which one of us finds too terrible to speak about.” He asked, “Do you experience that?” “Yes,” they replied. He said, “That is clear faith.” (Muslim from Abū Hurayra)